DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 895 RC 023 613

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TITLE	Principal Retention and Transition Patterns in a Cross-Section of New Zealand Rural Schools, May 1990-May 2000.
INSTITUTION	Christchurch Coll. of Education (New Zealand).
PUB DATE	2002-05-00
NOTE	19p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; *Elementary Schools; Foreign Countries; Job Satisfaction; Labor Turnover; *Occupational Mobility; *Principals; *Rural Schools; *Small Schools; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS	New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Since New Zealand introduced the Tomorrow's Schools reform in 1989, concerns have arisen about its effects on the school principalship. The main concerns relate to increased workload for principals, especially in small rural schools, and the potential for conflicts between the principal and rural community members. It was feared that such problems would lead to increased principal turnover in small rural schools. From May 1990 through May 2000, principal retention and transition data were collected from 50 small, rural primary schools in the Marlborough, Nelson, and Buller regions of New Zealand. All schools had fewer than 150 students; 20 had fewer than 51 students. Data include the number of principal transitions for each school, destination of the departing principal, and reasons for departure. The 50 schools had a total of 179 principals during the 10-year period. Five of the smallest schools closed during the period; the 45 schools that remained open had an average of 3.8 principals during the decade. Principals averaged 2.63 years per position overall and only 1.97 years in the smallest schools. Among departing principals, only a small number were seeking and gaining promotion, while a comparatively large number, particularly first-timers, were taking up other careers. Principal transitions were less frequent close to central towns and increased proportionately with distance from town. Workload was the most frequent reason for departure and was worst in the smallest schools. Various types of conflict were also important reasons. (Contains 16 references.) (SV)

Principal Retention and Transition Patterns in a Cross-Section of New Zealand Rural Schools

May 1990 – May 2000

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ABSTRACT

Principal retention and transition data were recorded for 50 small rural schools in the Marlborough, Nelson and Buller regions of New Zealand during the first decade (May 1990–May 2000) of the Tomorrow's Schools educational reforms. The data record the number of principal transitions for each school, the destination of the departing principal, and the reason(s) for departure. Analysis of the recorded data reveal five major findings: (i) a small number of schools have experienced no principal transition, while a significantly large number of schools have experienced many principal transitions; (ii) only a small number of principals are seeking and gaining promotion while a comparatively large number of principals, particularly first-timers, are taking up other career options; (iii) the number of principal transitions are lower in schools close to main centres but increase proportionately with increase in distance from the main centres; (iv) aspects such as workload and conflict are significant factors in turning principals away from ongoing principalship; and (v) the principal transition rate is very much higher in smaller rural than in larger urban schools.

Principal Retention and Transition Patterns in a Cross-Section of New Zealand Rural Schools

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools in 1989 different interest groups and individuals have expressed concern about its effects on school principalship. The main concerns relate to increased workload for principals and the potential for relationship difficulties between the principal and members of a small rural school community. The report of an investigation carried out soon after the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools by the Wellington Regional Council (Skene, 1990) into the effects of the reforms on principals, boards of trustees and communities in the Wellington region noted substantially increased workloads for principals and a high number of principal turnovers, and predicted that small rural schools would experience difficulty in attracting principals. The following year, another "rural schools" report commissioned by the School Trustees Association (STA) (Pilgrim, 1991) identified, on the basis of responses from 452 schools, issues of recruitment and retention, including the lack of career path opportunities and the low number of applicants for positions. Similar findings were evident in the Ministry of Education's (1991) report into the economic and educational viability of small rural schools. The report specifically mentioned "issues of teacher supply and retention facing some small schools" (p.18).

By the mid-1990s these trends had become well established. In 1995 New Zealand Principals Federation president Nola Hambleton voiced concern at a national forum about the lack of applicants for principalship in small rural schools and the fact that some rural school boards of trustees had recently appointed provisionally registered teachers to principal positions. Her comments were later

referred to in a front-page article on inexperienced staff heading rural schools in *New Zealand Education Review* (Gerritsen, 1998). In 1997, Hambleton's successor, Marilyn Yeoman, lamented, in her departing report (Yeoman, 1997), the loss of the traditional rural school career path for new principals. She identified professional isolation and workload as the two factors most likely to create casualties. Two years later, the Ministry of Education, in its briefing paper to the incoming Labour coalition government, warned about extra pressures on principals, especially in small rural schools. It went on to say that "Growing demands being placed on school leaders, combined with the high numbers of schools in New Zealand relative to our population, raise concerns about whether leadership capability is sufficient" (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 37).

More recent reports by teacher unions and principal associations (for example, *Eduvac*, 2000) suggest that teachers are shying away from top jobs because of increasing pressure and inadequate support and training. Wylie (1999) found that only 8% of teachers were interested in becoming principals, enough to maintain supply but not enough to provide choice for boards of trustees. During an interview reported in *New Zealand Education Review* (Rowe, 2000), New Zealand Principals Federation president Geoff Lovegrove stated that the federation's surveys and data had produced an almost identical figure of 9%.

A comparison of the number of principal vacancies advertised in the *Education Gazette* in 1989 with those advertised in 1999 indicates a noticeable increase, which translates to an increased movement in principalship. Recent data received from schools by the Principals Council and reported by Campbell (2000) show a significant drop-off in applicants for principal positions, from an average of approximately 20 applicants per position to six. These figures do not give a clear indication of the effect of location of a school on the number of applicants per position. In the aforementioned interview conducted by Rowe (2000), Geoff Lovegrove noted that the number of people applying to take up

principalships had been dwindling for about four years and that some remote or "unattractive" schools had received only one or no applicants for the principal's position. I have assembled my own list of small rural schools reporting fewer than five applicants per position in recent times, whereas 10 years ago, 10 or more applicants were received. The number of schools having to re-advertise to find a suitable applicant has also increased: re-advertised positions were virtually non-existent in the 1990 issues of the *Education Gazette*, yet by 2000 were to be found in nearly every issue.

Research and articles throughout the mid- to late-1990s relating to the workload of the teaching principal in New Zealand (for example, Livingstone, 1994, 1999; Murray, 1999; NZEI, 1996; Wylie, 1994, 1999; Yeoman, 1997) also highlighted concerns about the increasing amount of paperwork and administration, the demands (and their steady growth) from a wide range of agencies, the difficulty of trying to be both teacher and administrator when there are not enough hours in the day, and the uncertainty generated by anticipation of what changes or new demands might come next. These issues appear to be have been contributing factors in decisions to leave principalship or not to take up principalship, and to have affected those currently in principalship.

Some of these reports and statistics need to be read with caution. Several focus on extreme worst-case examples; others are from small survey samples, or are cited out of context for use in a magazine article that takes a particular bias or point of view. I believe the research data that I have carefully collated over the past decade gives a more encompassing and realistic picture of what has been happening regarding principalship in small rural schools. Admittedly, my study covers only one, albeit broad, geographical area of New Zealand, but I consider that the findings can be safely extrapolated to many of our small rural schools, especially when viewed in association with previous related research, survey findings and opinions.

METHOD

During the decade of May 1990–May 2000, I collected principalship-related data on a biannual basis (January and July) from a representative sample of 50 small, rural primary schools from the Marlborough, Nelson and Buller regions. For the purposes of this research, I defined "small" as "fewer than 150 students" and "rural" as being "associated with a predominantly rural district or rural town that has a primary industry as its economic base". Table 1 shows the number of schools in the representative sample, and gives their student roll band (e.g. 51–100), and the Ministry "U" band, which defines school size. I also split the total number of principals for each school size, that is, U1–U3, along gender lines so as to provide some preliminary statistical trend data on male/female patterns for the study region.

Table 1: Number of schools in the study group by school type

	U1 schools	*U2 schools*	*U3 schools*
Number of students	0–50	51–100	101–150
Number of schools	20	19	11

Data were obtained from two main sources: verbal accounts (always given willingly) from principals and/or chairpersons, and publicly available documents, such as school newsletters, board minutes and newspaper articles. The latter proved invaluable when I needed to obtain missing information or substantiate existing data.

The data reported here cover all principal movements (transitions) relating to principalships lasting one school term or more and include both tenured and limited tenure appointments. Short-term limited

tenure positions of less than one term are not included. Before October 1989, regional education boards implemented all principal appointments. All subsequent appointments, whether tenured or limited tenure, were made by individual school boards of trustees. Limited tenure appointments occur for three main reasons: (i) a board accepts the resignation of a departing principal and has a time gap to fill before it can complete another permanent principal appointment; (ii) a board grants some form of extended leave to the permanent principal; (iii) a principal leaves suddenly, unexpectedly or is suspended. Over the 10 years of my data collection, teachers entered limited tenured principalship in four different ways, although my data analysis does not differentiate between these. The first involves an existing staff member *acting up* into the position, and the second involves a *short-term or long-term reliever* coming into the position from outside the school. During the years 1990–1994, a Ministry of Education-funded scheme enabled a *mobile reserve teacher* to fill in as a temporary principal. In 1995 this was replaced by the *emergency staffing scheme* (ESS), which provides for ESS teachers to become limited tenure principals. This scheme continues to be used regularly in Nelson, Marlborough and Buller.

I also recorded data about the next intended or actual destination of the departing principals, and grouped these destinations into six main categories. I obtained this information through personal contact or interview, observation, media reports, and information passed on to me by close associates of each departing principal.

The reasons why resignations occurred are also documented. This information was of particular importance in cases where the person was leaving principalship, and I have taken care to record it as accurately and fully as possible.

RESULTS

Principal Transitions

Number of changes

The 50 schools had a total of 179 principals during the 10-year period. Table 2 shows the number of principal changes over this period in the 50 schools, stratified by school size and gender. During the research period, the Ministry of Education completed closure for five (10%) of the U1 schools. Four closed early in the study period, with only one principal having been employed. This "one only" situation shows up in the data for "number of principals" as 1, which has a marked impact on the final figures for the U1 schools (see Table 2). The first row of the table therefore shows in brackets data for the 45 U1 schools that remained open for the full 10-year study period. This addition alters the total average figure to 3.80 principals per school during the 10-year study period. Put another way, principals averaged 2.63 years employment in each principal position. For the 45 smaller U1 schools, this average figure was 1.97 years of employment for each U1 principal, whether tenured or limited tenure.

Table 2: Total number of principals in the 50 rural schools across the 10-year period by school size and gender

School size	*Number of schools*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total number of principals*	*Average number of principals*
U1	20 (15)*	42 (36)	42 (40)	84 (76)	4.20 (5.06)
U2	19	34	27	61	3.21
U3	11	26	8	34	3.09
Total	50	102	77	179	3.58

Note: *The numbers in brackets are those for the U1 schools that remained open throughout the entire 10-year period.

Six of the study's 45 schools (two U1, three U2, one U3) for which there were data throughout the entire 10-year period had only one principal (Table 3). Removal of these six from the study group sets the average number of principals across the remaining 39 schools and the 10-year period at 4.23. In terms of average number of years of employment, these data reveal that, throughout the period, principals (both tenured and limited tenure) averaged 2.36 years of employment. Limited tenure principal appointments occurred more frequently in the U1 and U2 schools (22 and 15 respectively) as a result of the higher changeover rate necessitating a greater use of acting principal, relieving principal, or mobile reserve/ESS principal positions. At the other end of the range, nine (18%) of the schools had six or more principals over the 10-year period. Most (78%) of these were U1 schools in distinctly remote rural locations or in traditionally "hard to staff" locations. None of the U3 schools had more than five principals.

Table 3: Number of principal appointments across the 10-year period in the 50 rural schools

	Number of principal appointments								
School size	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*
U1	6	-	1	4	2	2	4	-	1
U2	3	4	6	3	1	1	-	-	1
U3	1	4	1	3	2	-	-	-	-
Total	10	8	8	10	5	3	4	-	2

Changes during the different years

The number of principal transitions remained constant during the full 10-year period. There is very little variation, with each of the two-year periods having a similar number of principal transitions. Thus, the principal transition rate in small rural schools from 1990 on remained constant. However, the reasons as to why principals moved changed over time, as noted under "Reasons for Departing Principalship" below.

Changes according to school distance from urban centres

The schools closest to the main centres of Nelson and Blenheim were those with nil or few (one or two) changes. The use of concentric circles around each main centre showed that as the circles moved out, schools with four to six principal changes started to appear. This trend then eased off as the circles neared other centres, such as Kaikoura, Picton, Motueka, Takaka and Westport. This finding suggests that there is a direct correlation between the number of principal transitions and the distance from a commercial centre. Table 4 shows the distance relationship between the number of principals and the nearest main centre. A comparative analysis of these data with those for 20 larger (more than 150 students) urban and suburban schools in the main centres confirmed that schools in the "inner circle" experienced fewer changes of principal than those in the "outer circle" (Table 5).

Table 4: Number of principal appointments across the 10-year period by distance from main centres and rural towns

	Main Centres	Other Regions		Towns
Principal numbers	*Inner circle*	*Outer circle*	*Remote circle*	*Rural towns*
1–3	8	4	4	11
4–6	-	8	4	5
7–9	-	2	3	1
Total	8	14	11	17

Table 5: Number of principal appointments across the 10-year period by urban/rural schools

	Number of principals		
School type	*One to Two*	*Three*	*Four plus*
Urban	18 (90%)	2 (10%)	-
Rural	14 (31%)	8 (18%)	23 (51%)

Principal Destinations

Over the 10-year period, 179 different principals worked in the 50 schools in the study group. At the end of the period, keeping in mind that five schools had closed, we can see that 45 principals were employed in the remaining 45 schools. Data collected on the immediate destinations of the other 134 principals, including those from the closed schools, revealed a range of destinations. These can be presented under the following six broad categories (see also Table 6 for more detailed data relating to each school size):

1. *Career promotion to principalship of a larger school (higher salary band)*: 19 principals (14.17% of total), five of these involving major relocation to some other region within New Zealand.
2. *New position as principal of similar size school (same salary band)*: 23 principals (17.16%), seven of these involving major relocation to some other region within New Zealand.
3. *Return to Scale A or middle management teaching position*: 49 principals (36.56%), 12 of these involving major relocation to some other region within New Zealand, and one relocating overseas.
4. *Move to a non-teaching position with an educational agency*: five principals (3.73%).
5. *Career change away from principalship and education*: 27 principals (20.14%).
6. *Retirement, debilitating illness or death*: 11 principals (8.2%).

As Table 6 shows, deliberate movement away from principalship and back into teaching or completely away from teaching occurred at all school levels: U1 (71.21% of the movements), U2 (62.79%) and U3 (72%). The U1 band proportionately provided the lowest number (9.09%) of promotional movements to larger schools, with the U2 and U3 bands having a higher proportion (19.11%) of promotional movements.

Table 6: Immediate destinations of principals when resigning from a principalship

	Destination						
School type	*Larger school*	*Similar size school*	*Return to teaching*	*Non-teaching position*	*Career change*	*Health-related or retired*	*Total*
U1	6	13	27	-	15	5	66
U2	8	8	13	4	7	3	43
U3	5	2	9	1	5	3	25
Total	19	23	49	5	27	11	134

The overall representative figure for principal promotional movement from one salary band to another was 19 (14.17%). This means that 115 (85.83%) of our small rural school principals did not immediately move on promotion but moved in other directions. Of the 42 male U1 principals, only five moved on promotion to a higher salary band, and of the 42 female U1 principals, only one moved on promotion to a higher salary band. The comparative figures for U2 show four males and four females. None of the eight female principals from the U3 band moved on promotion during the 10-year period, while five males did. These gender differences can partly be explained by the fact that more females were in limited tenure positions with limited career promotion possibilities, and entered into a principal employment situation with no long-term principalship aspirations.

Twenty-seven principals (20.14%) made a complete career move away from the education sector. There was no discernible gender difference. The immediate career destinations of this group indicated such occupations as hotel/motel management, agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, boat building, retail, parenting, marketing and tourism. One principal simply hopped on a yacht and sailed off into the sunset, to see what the next chapter in life might offer.

Reasons for Departing Principalship

Of the 134 principals involved in transition during the 10-year period, 92 (68.65%) departed from a principalship. Principals gave a wide range of reasons for leaving, and most gave several reasons. The reasons are grouped here into eight broad categories (see also Table 7):

1. *Ongoing conflict and relationships difficulty*: with staff, and/or board of trustees, and/or parents.
2. *Pressured by board of trustees*: discipline and performance issues.
3. *Workload*: hours of work, increasing expectations, change, stress, pressure of Education Review Office visits/reports.
4. *Focus on teaching*: return to original chosen career with a full-time teaching focus.
5. *Professional change*: time to do/try something different within education sector, middle management, other educational agencies, overseas travel/teaching.
6. *Career change*: time to do/try something totally away from the education sector.
7. *School change*: principal deciding the school needed a change of leadership.
8. *Family/personal*: relocate for family and health reasons such as spouse's career move, child needing access to secondary school, marriage difficulties, need to be closer to the services of a main town, need to be closer to extended family.

Table 7: Reasons for departure from principalship

	Reasons							
School size	*Conflict/ relation-ship difficulties*	*BOT pressure*	*Workload*	*Focus on teaching*	*Profess-ional change*	*Career change*	*School change*	*Family/ personal*
U1	6	8	18	13	9	4	4	7
U2	3	3	10	9	2	-	4	6
U3	4	5	5	1	2	-	2	6

The reasons as to why principals departed their positions changed over the 10-year period. During the first four years of the study period, May 1990–May 1994, movements were most likely to occur because of ongoing conflict (reasons 1 and 2), and because of change factors (reasons 4, 5 and 6). In the latter four years, May 1996–May 2000, more movements occurred because of workload (reason 3), with several principals commenting that the problem is never ending and seems to be getting worse, with no relief in sight. This research shows that across time principal workload became an increasingly important factor in small rural school principal transition.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The results clearly suggest that our small rural schools are experiencing a very high rate of principal transition. Of the schools sampled for this study, the rate was far greater in the smaller U1 schools and in those schools more distant from a main centre. UI remote schools were those schools most affected. For these schools this situation creates important implications. These include ongoing costs associated with the appointment and relocation processes, the principal induction programme, and the principal

development programme. There are also the hard to measure non-financial costs: disruption to school planning and programmes; changing values, practices and school culture; relationship and teamwork issues; and the continual uncertainty of not knowing when the next principal transition will occur.

These concerns need to be viewed alongside the fact that first-time principals or those with minimal experience form a high proportion of small school appointments. In several instances those appointed in the study schools were beginning teachers (first or second year of teaching) or teachers coerced into temporary relieving or acting positions because nobody else was readily available. These are the principals more likely to make mistakes, the principals who need the most support, yet are the most professionally isolated.

The attrition rate of those departing from principalship, and those departing from education, has implications for the educational sector. Huge resources of money, time, expertise and experience are lost every time one of these people departs. While there are many reasons for departure, there is a clear indication that the issue of workload is very significant. This is consistent with other findings, such as those reported by Colleen Murray (1999) in her joint Ministry of Education/New Zealand Principals Federation report, which identified as matters for concern the increasingly complex and demanding role of the principal, and the constant pressure from regulatory and compliance obligations.

Recently announced government initiatives (Ministry of Education, 2001), such as increased management and professional leadership time for small rural schools, increases to operation grants, national initiatives for principal training and development, streamlined school administration through greater use of IT, and enhanced advisory service support for schools, provide clear signals that the government has been aware of the issue of workload and is committing resources towards easing the

problem. Other issues such as human relationships difficulties, personality conflicts, and the misunderstandings relating to board of trustees roles and responsibilities also need to be addressed if principal transition rates in small rural are to be reduced.

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